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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001741

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DHAHRAN SENDS  
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: SHI'A LEADER TAKING ADVANTAGE OF ALL OPPORTUNITIES  
TO PROMOTE REFORM

REF: 2005 RIYADH 9401

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Jafar Al-Shayeb, President and elected member of Qatif's municipal council and one of five people appointed to the Dammam branch of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), shared with CG and PolOff on March 15 his philosophy that "every positive initiative should be utilized." He described obstacles faced by the municipal council and expressed doubt that the NSHR could help improve human rights at the political level, but he emphasized the value of both institutions as avenues to educate citizens about their rights and increase their participation in political and social processes. He said that there was "a little progress" on issues of concern to the Shi'a community under King Abdullah's tenure: "There is an intention to resolve issues, but not to do it publicly so as to avoid a backlash." End summary.

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"Any Place There is Room, We are Trying to Utilize It"  
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¶2. (C) Al-Shayeb began the meeting by sharing a copy of NSHR's monthly newsletter and noting that the Dammam branch, to which he was appointed, will open officially in several weeks. Asked by the CG if the NSHR would have the clout to address in a serious way important human rights violations in the Kingdom, Al-Shayeb responded indirectly, saying that he saw great opportunities for using the NSHR as a vehicle to educate citizens about their rights. The Dammam branch of the NSHR, he continued, plans to offer seminars and workshops on human rights issues, in coordination with regional and international bodies where possible. In terms of resolving specific complaints, he acknowledged that the NSHR's job would be difficult because "government agencies are not always that responsive." Al-Shayeb doubted that the NSHR would be able to raise political issues, such as the status of political prisoners, effectively. The government-run Human Rights Commission might have more clout in raising political issues, he explained, because its head, Turki Al-Sudeiri, is "more aggressive."

¶3. (C) Al-Shayeb described the value of the municipal councils in similar terms, emphasizing the importance of the "process of elections" regardless of what the councils may be able to accomplish in the near-term. In the Qatif area, he

noted, council members were continuing the process of involving citizens in municipality affairs by setting up committees in each community to give input on priority projects. As for the actual work done by the councils to date, Al-Shayeb said that the Qatif council, and others he had heard of as well, were encountering a "psychological reluctance" from municipalities and other government offices "to release information and have people questioning what they are doing." He gave the specific example of contract management, saying that government offices were resisting providing copies of contracts and files on performance to the municipal council. Asked by PolOff whether the council had any input into the almost-finished "master plan" for the greater Dammam area, including Qatif, that a consultant at the emirate was developing (reftel), Al-Shayeb said that in recent weeks council members had met with the consultant and were trying to convince him to do a presentation in Qatif to get input from local residents. Summing up his and his colleagues' efforts on the NSHR and the Qatif municipal council, Al-Shayeb declared, "Any place there is room, we are trying to utilize it."

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A New SAG Openness to Change, but Quietly  
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14. (C) Asked by the CG whether the first six months of King Abdullah's reign had brought improvements for the Shi'a, Al-Shayeb replied, "There has been a little progress and there is an intention to resolve issues, but not in a public way." A group of Shi'a had met with Interior Minister Naif ten days ago, he said, and he seemed much more open to hearing their concerns. As examples of positive recent changes, Al-Shayeb said that the Ministry of Information had

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begun to grant permits for publication of Shi'a religious books, and, "for the first time in history," the SAG had appointed Shi'a to the top two management positions at the Qatif Central Hospital and five Shi'a women as principals in girls' schools in Qatif ("though not yet in Al-Ahsa"). Al-Shayeb said the Shi'a delegation had pushed Prince Naif to address the problem of employment discrimination in a broader, more public way: "Prince Naif says privately that people should be hired based on qualifications, with no regard to religious background or hometown, but we told him he needs to say that publicly. We need the principle of non-discrimination to be part of our laws or constitution." Al-Shayeb also mentioned the SAG's unwillingness to grant permits for new husseiniyas as an important issue for the Shi'a, saying that the unofficial husseiniyas, located in people's homes, posed safety risks.

15. (C) Al-Shayeb hosts a regular forum for discussion of social, cultural, and political issues; there are reportedly up to six to eight similar gatherings in Qatif. Al-Shayeb noted that the issues faced by the Shi'a were starting to attract more interest outside of the Eastern Province, thanks in part to a small but steady flow of cultural, political, and religious figures to these forums: "Now groups can talk to each other, without the Wahhabi group in the center stopping it. People from other parts of the country are asking to come to my forum, even some from a Salafi background." As an example, Al-Shayeb said that a "religiously conservative but open minded" Majlis Al-Shura member from Buraida would be addressing his forum in the coming weeks.

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Bio Note  
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16. (SBU) Al-Shayeb was born on January 10, 1959. Like many current leaders in the Shi'a community, he went into exile from the early 1980s until 1994, during which time he received a master's degree in economics from Middle Tennessee

State University. He is the Shi'a community's most visible civic figure. End bio note.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)  
OBERWETTER